

## MACEDONIAN FOLK CONSTELLATIONS

GJORE CENEV

*MKC – Planetarium, Kej Dimitar Vlahov bb, 1000 Skopje, Republic of Macedonia*  
*E-mail: mkc@mt.net.mk*

**Abstract.** Ethno-astronomical researches started to be performed on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia in 1982 and since then they are constantly carried out. Information gathered directly from the elderly inhabitants of around 130 villages all over the country, enlighten the folk presentation of sky, division of the stars and constellations, but also provided a vast scope of myths, beliefs and rituals linked to the sky, stars, and constellations. More in-depth analyses of the gathered data lead to the reconstruction of the ancient stars map of the Macedonian people. Due to the fact that in the past people recognized only two seasons, most of the stars and constellations are presented on the so-called winter and summer sky. People were also familiar with the part of the sky around the Polaris and knew about the constellations that did not rise and set, but are special part of the folk sky map. The mentioned study provides a comparative analysis of the folk constellations known among the Macedonian people and folk constellations known among the others, mostly neighbouring people living on the Balkan Peninsula.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Cosmogony myths and rituals have central role in each nation's collective conscience. Through them, we receive the images of the beginning of the times, of the Golden age when Gods-Creators divide the Chaos from the Order, Good from the Bad and create the world according to the Gods' standards and principles of good and beautiful. Cosmogony myths provide answers to two very important questions related to the perception of the earthly, underground, and celestial world. Answers that these myths provide are not just on the questions how the world was created but also to the question why the world was created. Cosmogony myths and rituals sometimes encompass local versions, but mostly they contain common characteristics traced in all nations, especially if the analyzed data refer to longer time periods. Explanation for such occurrences can be found in the common starting point concerning the observation of the same sky and of the similar celestial objects' movements especially those of the Sun and the Moon.

In the book "The Way of Myth" Joseph Campbell states: "Myths and religions has always been focused according to some basic archetypes that are mostly phylo-genetic and are same in all cultures, and therefore cannot be ownership of just one nation or just one religion" (Campbell 2002). Moreover, he judges today's' reality and points

out that in the modern high developed world the intellect has the greatest value, while the knowledge is simply reduced to collection and transfer of information and therefore from the great religious beliefs only the empty form has left. Thus the real spirit of the people and its original meaning linked to the interrelations of the people, the Gods and the Cosmos should be sought out in villages where the benefits of the modern civilization has not reached.

Starting in 1982, on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia systematic collection of people's perceptions of the sky, celestial objects, earth, time, and climatic changes was undertaken. In other words, ethno-astronomical and ethno-metrological researches were conducted among Macedonian people. If we take into account the fact that cosmogony myths and rituals among the Macedonian people were recorded in written form for the first time as part of this research and that until then they were transferred only orally from generation to generation, it is surprising how they managed to last so long.

Myths for the creation of the world, creation of the Earth as a Mother –Goddess, creation of the God Sun and the Sunny mountain, myths about the Moon that gets to the Earth and turns into a cow, images of the months as divinity creatures, original division of the sky into constellations and etc., has nothing in common with the existing Christian religion of the population. These myths have deeper roots reaching even to the pre-historical times. The fact that they have survived different conquerors such as Romans and Turks that ruled hundreds of years on these areas, or the fact that they survived influences of various religions such as Romans, Islamic and Christian is evidence by itself confirming their vitality and how deeply they are graven in the collective conscience of the people. By this, we got an impression that concerning the communication with the Cosmos, Macedonian villagers had developed and accepted two parallel and equal systems of values. They believe in the Holy Bible and Jesus Christ at the same time when they believe that the Earth, the Sun, and the Moon are divinity, having influence not only on their lives, but also on lives of the animals and plants.

## 2. SKY MAP

In the past 25 years, researchers participating in the ethno-astronomical project have visited over 140 villages all over the territory of R. Macedonia and conducted interviews with more than 1500 elderly persons. Most of the obtained findings were published in 2004 (Cenev 2004) when a special star map with names and positions of the stars and constellations known to the people was also prepared and published (Fig. 1). Evidently, in the past people knew about more constellations, which all interviewed people confirmed. Nevertheless, the map included only constellations that people can recall and constellations whose sky positions could be determined by great certainty.

Usually sky maps are presented in circular form, but for this occasion, we decided and at the same time in compliance with the people's perception and division of the sky, to develop a map consisting of three (3) parts. According to the claims of all interviewed elderly people living in Macedonian villages, the year used to be divided

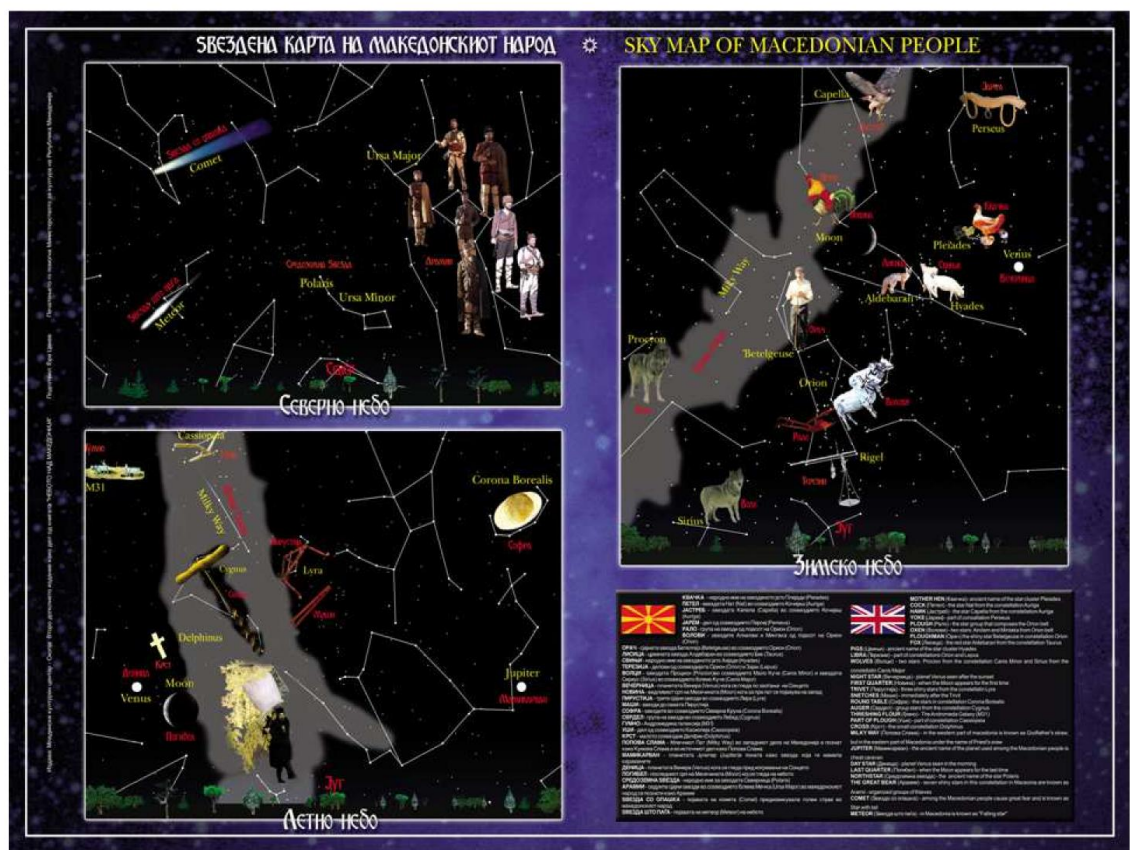


Figure 1: See the text.

only in two seasons: winter and summer. The winter stars on 8<sup>th</sup> of November day known among the people as Mitrovden or St. Dimitris Day and ends on 6<sup>th</sup> of May day known as Gjurgjovden or St. Georges Day. Accordingly, summer starts on Gjurgjovden and ended on Mitrovden. Therefore, people recognize constellations of the winter and summer sky adequately presented in the sky map. Researches revealed people’s familiarity with constellations positioned around the Polar Star (in macedonian Severnica) and with their circular movement on the sky, as well as the fact that these stars do not rise or set in the course of the year. Thus, part of the sky around the Polar Star (Severnica) is presented as separate part of the sky map.

3. WINTER SKY CONSTELLATIONS

In astronomy, there is an opinion that the winter sky has the most beautiful appearance as it contains great number of bright stars and star clusters. These bright starts can be recognized easily and thus it is not surprising that they were the basis for development of the images of the sky and images of the constellations. The same as elsewhere, among the Macedonian people we recorded the greatest number of data concerning the winter sky constellations (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: See the text.

**Mother Hen** (Kvachka) is the best-known constellation as all elderly people of Macedonian villages without any exception recognised it (Fig. 3). This name people use for the star cluster Pleiades. People claim that there are three main **characteristics** on the sky that always, but especially in the morning, should be searched on the sky. Those three characteristics by order are the following: **Mother Hen** (Kvachka) or with astronomical terms the star cluster Pleiades, **Morning Star (Denica)** that is the name people used for the planet Venus and the **Ploughman** (Orach) name people used for the bright star Betelgeuse in the astronomical constellation Orion. People use these characteristics in summer and at the beginning of the autumn to determine the time for waking up and starting agricultural works. Usually people say: when Mother Han rises in the east, it is around two o'clock after midnight. That is the time when the housewives wake up and make bread for the workers on the fields. Then, on an interval of one goad (osten or wooden stick for prodding cattle with around 2 metres of length) the Ploughman will appear on the east horizon and it will be around 3 o'clock after midnight, time when all ploughmen should wake up and prepare to go to the fields. Finally, the Morning Star will rise announcing that the Sun will also rise very soon, and when the Sun rises all the people should already be on their fields performing various agricultural activities (Cenev 2004).



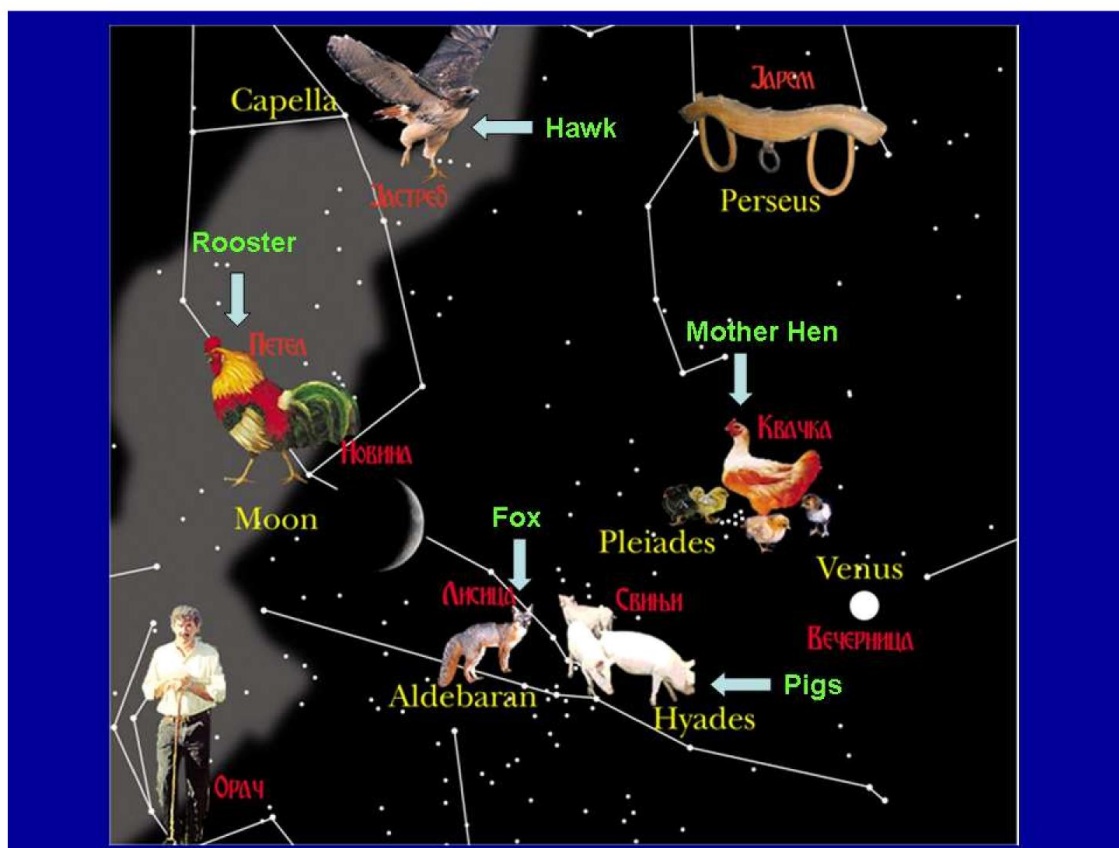


Figure 3: See the text.

Villagers most frequently describe Mother Hen as one hen-mother surrounded by 6-7 chickens. In the villages in southeast Macedonia we recorded beliefs that all types of plants with grains must be collected from the fields before Mother Hen shows on the sky. In summer when it appears in the morning hours it is very low on the horizon, so they believed that very easily Mother Hen could come to the Earth with its hungry chickens and eat everything from the fields.

Ethno-astronomical and ethnological researches conducted on the broader region of the Balkan Peninsula including Europe, have shown that the star cluster Pleiades is known among all nations under the names of Mother Hen or Hen with chickens (Mladenova 2006 p.109). Yet, on the territory of Serbia (Janković 1951, Djordjević 1958) and west and southwest Bulgaria (Mladenova 2006 p. 109) Pleiades are known under the names such as Vlach (Vlashi or Vlashichi) and are described as a group of seven Vlach or Aromas (Vlasi or Aromani) (Djordjević 1958, Dimitrova-Todorova 1983).

Other stars and constellations known among people under names of different animals closely connected to the life of the hen surround Mother Hen as one of the main characteristics of the sky. Therefore, in its surroundings we can find the following constellations:

**Rooster** (Petal): This is the name of the star Nat from the Auriga astronomical constellation.

**Hawk** (Jastreb): Hawk, as one of the most famous enemies of Mother Hen and the Rooster, is right above them in an attacking position. Bright star Capella (Kapela) from the Auriga astronomical constellation is actually known among the people as Hawk.

**Fox** (Lisica): Fox is also enemy of the Mother Hen and the Rooster (second in its importances) it is obvious why people also "see" it on the sky. The red colour of the bright star Aldebaran from the Taurus astronomical constellation is the reason why people perceive it as a Fox ready to attack Mother Hen and the Rooster.

Surroundings of Mother Hen can be presented as one ordinary yard of a typical village house. For this reason, in its surroundings the people see the following constellations:

**Pigs** (Svinji): Near Mother Hen, on the sky the people noticed the star cluster Hyades. Scattered pattern of the stars in this cluster associated people of the image of pigs in a village yard, so they called them as such.

**Yoke** (Jarem): People under this name recognize group of stars in the Perseus astronomical constellation. Yoke for the oxen is used usually in village yards so that we see why the previous constellation is evidence of the image and purpose given by the people.

A little bit farther from Mother Hen and the image of village yards, we record the second group of constellations known among the people, which create the general image of the work in the village fields (Fig. 4). Here, on this part of the sky the people recognize the following constellations:

**Ploughman** (Orach): Previously we mentioned that the Ploughman is one of the three main characteristics of the sky. The Ploughman is the name the people gave to the bright star Betelgeuse in Orion astronomical constellation. It should be noted that beside Aldebaran in the process of creation of the people's image of constellation less bright stars were also taken into account, as according to the people's beliefs the Ploughman is the image of a person with goad returning home.

**Plough with Oxen** (Ralo so Volovi): Astronomical constellation Orion consists of a great number of bright stars appears as a typical pattern dominant of the winter sky and can be found very easily. People from Macedonian villages very frequently point to the region of Orion saying that the three bright stars and the surrounding less bright stars create an image of one wooden Plough with two yoked oxen.

**Wolves** (Volci): Near the plough with oxen, which are left on a field, people see two wolves as well. Wolves are two bright stars Sirius (constellation Canis Major) and Procyon (Canis Minor).

The Ploughman, Plough with Oxen and Wolves are part of one bigger image for which people use to say (Cenev 2004): "Early in the morning the Ploughman went to plough but when he got to the field he noticed that he had forgotten the belt for the oxen. He decided to return and take the belt. This is the reason why he is a little bit farther from the Plough and Oxen that he left on the field. When the wolves saw that the oxen are left alone on the field they started to group and sneak, so as to attack them".

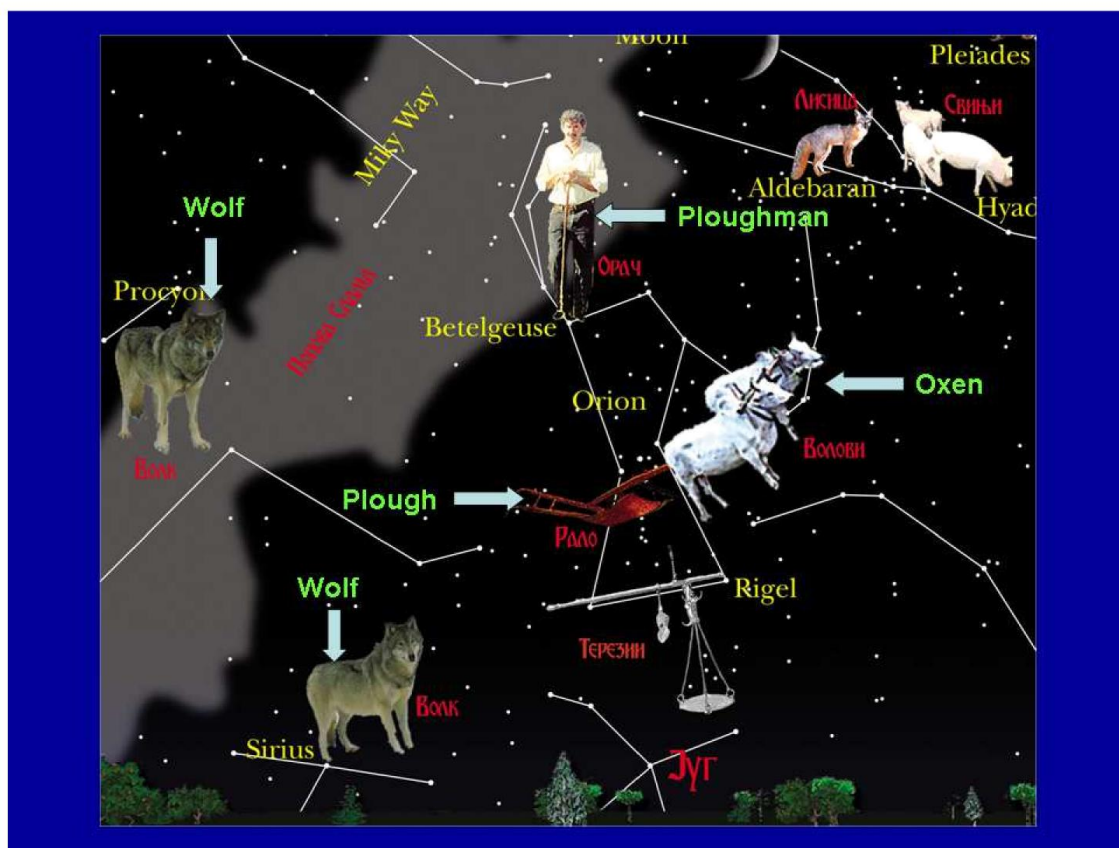


Figure 4: See the text.

According to the existing ethnological and ethno-astronomical literature found in some countries (Djordjević 1958, Janković 1951, Kolev and Koleva 1998), as well as in considered texts from the broader region (Mladenova 2006 p. 117-127), it can be said that the images of Ploughman, Plough, Oxen and Wolves are known all over the Balkan Peninsula. Very often among the people we can record names derived from the roots of these words or description of the parts of plough, but they only enrich the image of this winter sky region like the image of a field where ordinary agricultural activities are performed.

The people speak about another constellation, which at first seems to deviate from the general image of this part of the winter sky. This constellation is **Libra** (Terezii). On the line with the people's description this constellation is composed of two bright stars Rigel and Saiph from the Orion astronomical constellation, as well as a group of fainter stars from the Lepus astronomical constellation. Existence of this people's constellation on the winter sky can be interpreted in two ways. The first one is to accept this constellation as part of one older and richer image of the winter sky and its division in constellations. The second way is this people's constellation to be accepted as a symbol of the winter period when people are not occupied with agricultural works, but with trade.



Figure 5: See the text.

4. SUMMER SKY CONSTELLATIONS

**Priest’s Straw** (Popova Slama): Our Galaxy - Milky Way by its appearance is dominant on the summer sky (Fig. 5). People have noticed its shape and built up their own myth about this occurrence on the sky (Fig. 6). Consistent with the most frequently narrated myth (Cenev 2004) during a very cold winter a priest stayed out without straw for the cattle. He decided to steal some from his godson. The relation between godson and godfather is perceived as very close one among the Macedonian people so stealing from the godson is considered as a great sin. Further, in the myth it is said that the priest went to the threshing floor of his godson, fill out the sack with straw and start running. God saw this act and made all stolen straw to be spread along the road as the priest was running. A bit later this image was transferred on the sky as eternal remark and warning about this great sin. On the basis of this myth in the western parts of Macedonia very often the Priest’s straw is called **Godfather’s Straw**.

In addition, the following constellations are linked to the Priest’s straw myth:

**Threshing floor** (Gumno): Circular and foggy appearance of the Andromeda galaxy (M31) evoked people to see the threshing floor with straw from where the



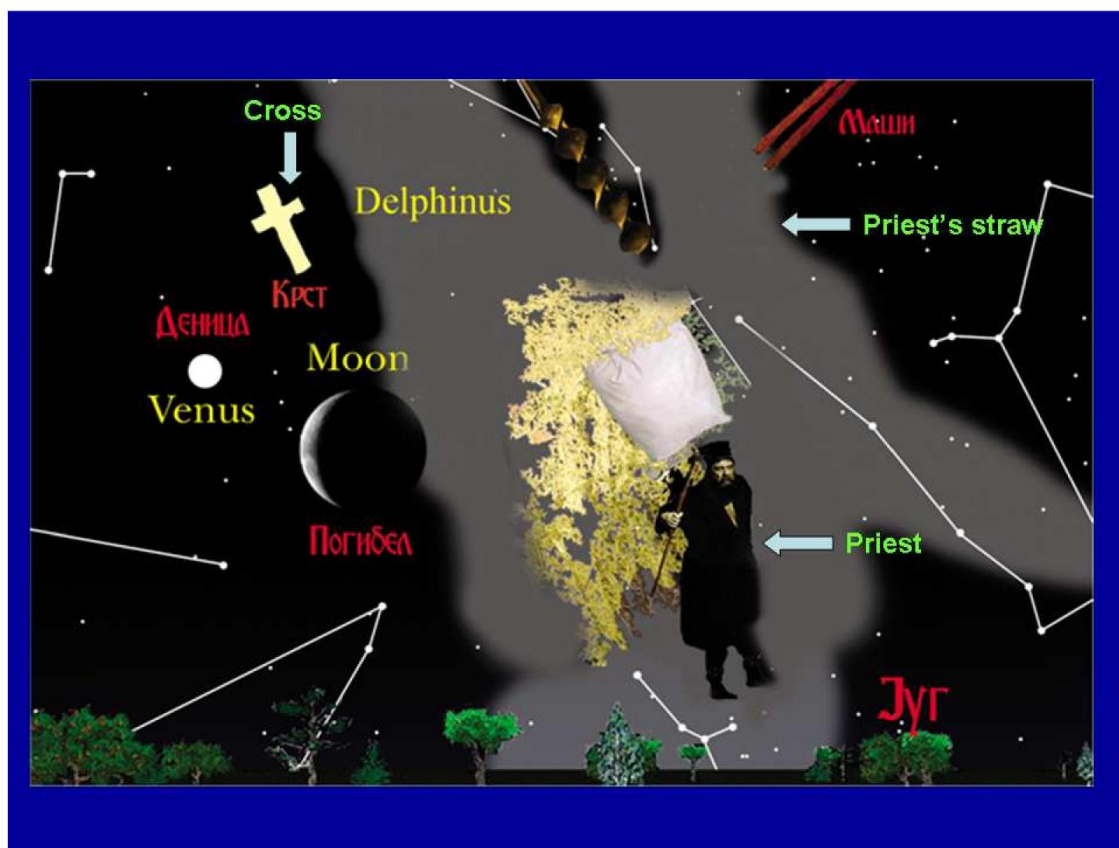


Figure 6: See the text.

godfather was stealing from his godson.

**Cross (Krst):** Complementary with the people's belief when the priest- thief saw God's might he started running in panic and lost his cross on the way. So next to the Priest's Straw there is the Cross. By this, people explain the name of four stars from the small astronomical constellation Delphinus. Due to its dimensions, people use to say Small Cross or Priest's Cross. Current literature in the neighbouring countries trace the existence of Big Cross constellation (Mladenova 2006 p. 184-185) referring to the astronomical constellation Cygnus.

**Ears (Ushi):** By this common word used as a jargon, Macedonian villagers mark part of the wooden plough that goes into the soil, used for ploughing. By the Ears, people name the image created by several bright and several not so bright stars from the astronomical constellation Cassiopeia. The Ears are located close to the Threshing floor. Both of the people's constellations are part of a broader image of yard that can be found in every Macedonian village.

In ethnological and ethno-astronomical literature of all nations living on the Balkan Peninsula very often names used for our Galaxy include the word straw such as, for example Priest's Straw, Godfather's Straw, Straw Way, the Straw, etc. (Mladenova 2006 p.149-166). In northern Greece very often people talk about Priest's Straw

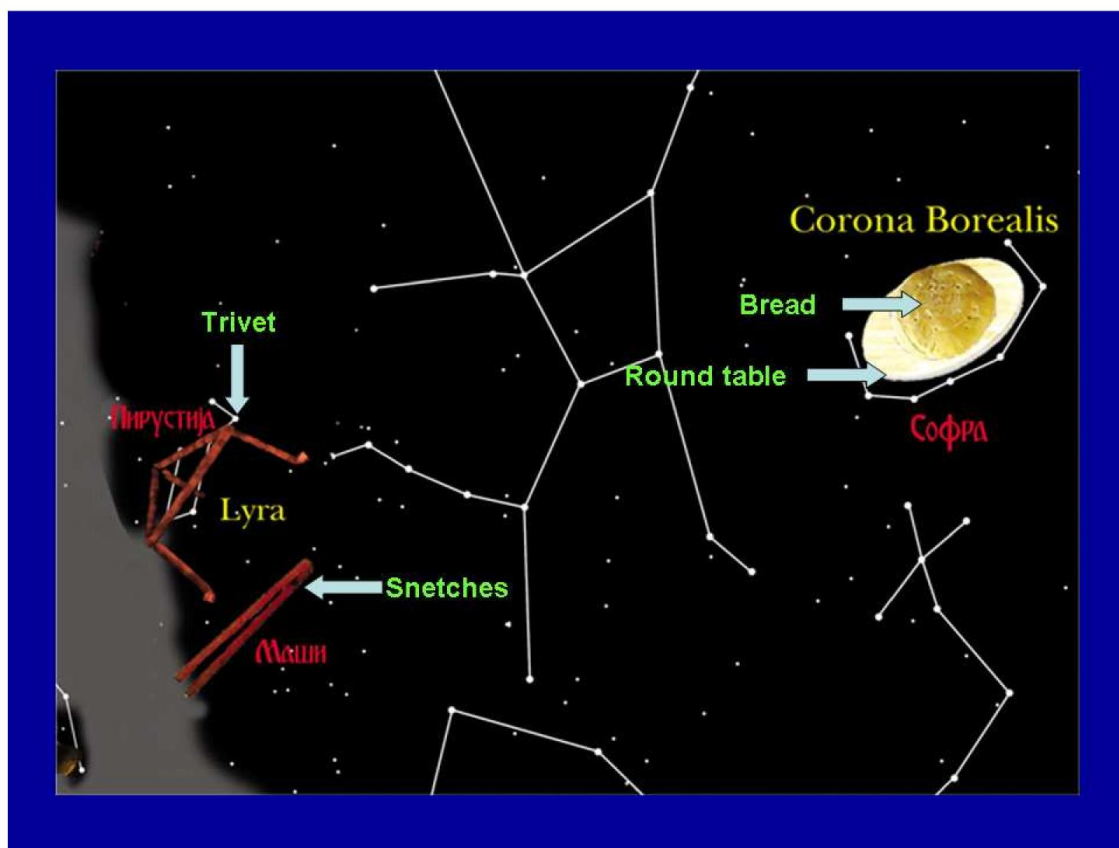


Figure 7: See the text.

(Abbot 1903), while in other parts of Greece as well as in West-Europe countries we have the name of the Milky Way. Even so, analyses have shown that the word straw is part of the name of our Galaxy used in a broader region that from Balkan Peninsula through Asia Minor reaches Egypt (Mladenova 2006 p. 342).

When people describe the summer sky, they indicate a special group of constellations, including (Fig. 7):

**Trivet** (Pirustija): The trivet is usually a metal device with three legs, which fits over the fire to support pans and kettles while preparing food. People use this name to describe the triangle shaped of the bright star Vega and two not so bright stars from the Lyra astronomical constellation.

**Tongs** (Mashi): The Tongs were used for the fire where the trivet is and thus the people's constellation Tongs is very close to the constellation Trivet. Tongs are three stars of Lyra constellation shaping equiangular triangle.

**Low round wooden dining table** (Sofra): The typical semi-circular shape of the astronomical constellation Corona Borealis evoked the image of wooden round table called sofra. Sofra is the place where the entire family gathers in the evening to have dinner, thus often people say that in the past this constellation had richer description with people sitting round the table and young bride serving.



Figure 8: See the text.

The same as in the case of the winter sky, people on the summer sky describe a characteristic constellation that at first seems to have no connection with other people's constellations. This constellation is **Drill/Gimlet** (Svrđel). People state that this is a very big drill used for construction of houses and is found inside the Priest's Straw. Actually, by the constellation **Drill/Gimlet** (Svrđel) people describe a typical pattern of bright stars from the astronomical constellation Cygnus. Similarly to the case of the constellation **Libra** (Terezii), for the **Drill/Gimlet** (Svrđel) we can also assume that it is a symbol of the time during the year when it is seen on the sky. Namely, **Drill/Gimlet** (Svrđel) appears sky in spring, the time when people start constructing houses, before they become engaged with agricultural works.

## 5. NORTH SKY CONSTELLATIONS

The north sky (Fig. 8) occupies just a small part of the people's division of the sky. Here, people describe only one constellation, but of course, they know about the Polar Star (Severnica) which is often called Midland Star.

**Thieves** (Aramii): Famous astronomical constellation Ursa Major among the people is described as group of thieves. Seven bright stars of the Ursa Major astronomical

constellation are said to be thieves "because during the entire night they circle on the sky just as thieves that circle around houses" (Cenev 2004). People are also familiar with the double star Mizar. Moreover, the fainter star Alcor is called small thief, i.e. a child kidnapped by the thieves and now thought to become one of them. In a more recent period, this constellation was called Komiti who are actually fighters for freedom against the Turkish occupation. People say that the seven stars of Ursa Major are the same as seven komiti-fighters that preparing themselves to attack the Turks.

The astronomical constellation of Ursa Major is known among all peoples, but in most of the cases under different names. Names such Aramii, Ajduci or Hajduci are used in Macedonia, parts of Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Mladenova 2006 p. 80-84). However, very often this constellation is described as Big Carriage or Carriage with oxen (Djordjević 1958) or Volovari (Mladenova 2006 p. 84).

## 6. AS A CONCLUSION

Specific grouping of people's constellations, their names and supporting mythology lead us to the conclusion that Macedonian villager copied his entire world onto the sky. He imagined his sky house, which in summer is right above his real house on the Earth. The Trivet and the Tongs are placed by the fire, and together with the Low Round Wooden Dining Table they have a central position in every village house. If we remember that the Lyra astronomical constellation in the summer is close to the zenith, then the desire of the villager to connect his sky house and the real one becomes obvious. This is the case especially in the summer when the harvest from the fields is collected. This very important period guarantees his survival until the next year. According to the opinions of great number of anthropologists, religious man set his heart on living in the centre of the world, which will enable him to communicate with Gods. Importance of the line body -house -Cosmos is perceived even in the early stages of the development of all known cultures and it is built in as archaic religiousness in all human civilization cultures (Eliade 2004).

Summarizing it can be concluded that people's constellations that have been found and taken out from the collective memory of the people are just part of a very richer perception of the sky traced among the Macedonian people as a very important part of their culture. In addition, it can be confirmed that this people's image of the sky together with the names and mythology of people's constellations is in correlation with similar divisions and mythologies found in the neighbouring countries. Therefore, one should ask the questions when and where the birth of the Balkan religious traditions took place as a base of the people's spiritual culture.

On the basis of the sky divisions and names given to the people's constellations, as well as the symbolism and mythology they contain, it can be concluded that their roots are in the early agricultural communities that existed in the period of neolith on the area of the Balkans. The question where these religious traditions appeared first in this respect has no importance if we take into account the fact of global uniformity of the numerous neolith cultures that are constituent of the so-called Balkan-Anatolian



complex (Čausidis 1996). Questions with more importance are those referring to how and by whose interference these myths and traditions have survived for several thousands of years and are still present in the people's culture of all Balkan nations. They should be answered in the future by comparative analyses and cooperation among specialists in the area of anthropology, ethnology, ethno- astronomy, history of religions, linguistics and etc.

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